



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

# Measuring the Impact of Participation in Mutual Self-Help Parent Support Groups

## 2001-2002 OUTCOMES EVALUATION



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# Family Support Network's Outcome Evaluation, 2001–2002

## Executive Summary

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*“I make a conscious effort every morning to tell myself that I won’t raise my kids the way I was raised.”*

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### INTRODUCTION

The mission of Family Support Network (FSN) is to prevent child abuse and neglect by promoting positive parenting, healthy families, and homes where children are valued and loved. Since 1979, Family Support Network has been working to maintain the development of a statewide network of mutual self-help parent support groups that are characterized by shared leadership. This network of community-based, volunteer and collaborative affiliates provides the local leadership and guidance needed to sustain a vibrant network of support groups across the state of Minnesota.

### PURPOSE

Family Support Network was interested in learning if parents make positive changes in their lives while they attend FSN mutual self-help support groups. By understanding how people change and in what ways, we also can strengthen our organization for parents. The FSN Evaluation Task Force launched an outcomes evaluation project to gather information from parents to document the impact of the support group experience.

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*“I know I am not going through challenges alone.”*

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### METHOD

The FSN Evaluation Task Force received funding from the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation to commission two studies to achieve our evaluation objectives. The Evaluation Task Force developed questions to learn more



about how participation in FSN support groups enhances parenting practices, self-management skills, use of support systems (both informal and formal helping resources), and the quality of parent-child relationships. These categories were

chosen based on research that tells us that protective factors associated with them reduces the likelihood for abuse and neglect.

An exploratory study using three focus groups was conducted to identify the benefits parents experience while attending an FSN support group. Twenty parents, who attend a FSN support group in their home community, participated in one of three, two-hour focus groups. Focus Groups were conducted by consultant, Lisa Bugman, in late May and early June of 2001.

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*“Seeing other parents overcoming challenges and crises that you’re facing gives you more confidence.”*

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In addition, and building on the results of the first study, a self-report *Reflections* survey (one version in English and a second in Spanish) was developed in partnership with consultant, Christa Treichel, and distributed to FSN support groups across the state. This survey examined whether parents gained skills and knowledge while participating in the FSN groups. Additional questions were included to explore attendance patterns, why parents join an FSN group, and parent empowerment, involvement and leadership. Surveys were collected from 128 parents out of a possible 296 parents attending FSN groups across the state of MN during the month of April 2002 (a 43% response rate).

### RESULTS

#### *How do parents learn about Family Support Network?*

Parents are most likely to find out about FSN through friends/family, social workers or posters and brochures.

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*“The challenges don’t get easier, I just handle them more effectively.”*

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#### *Why do parents join a Family Support Network group?*

Most parents turned to the FSN group for parenting tips and ideas, and because many of them are single parents and/or are frustrated with parenting.

Parents completing the survey reported multiple risk factors for child abuse and neglect. For example, a large group of parents reported a childhood history of abuse, disclosed abusive or neglectful behavior toward their own children, or reported their children’s exposure to domestic abuse. In addition, many reported low family incomes.



### *How does the Family Support Network group impact parenting knowledge and skills?*

Four domains of parenting knowledge and skills were examined in this study:

- **Self-management skills** – Parents’ understanding of the importance of taking care of themselves so they can manage their own stress and anger in order to care for others.
- **The quality of the parent/child relationship** – Parents’ understanding of the importance of spending time with children, communicating with them, recognizing their individuality, and developing rituals or routines to structure the environment.
- **Parenting skills or parenting practices** – Parents’ understanding about child development and discipline.
- **Use of formal and informal support systems** – Parents’ understanding about available community resources, accessing these resources, and exploring their own informal circle of support for themselves as adults and parents.

Parents rated their knowledge and skills higher at the time the survey was administered in comparison to how they rated themselves before they joined FSN. The longer the parents were involved with FSN, the less they thought of their former parenting abilities. Parents’ knowledge of community resources also increased – a result they attributed to their involvement with FSN.

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*“ I can’t expect perfection from a five year old. I used to get mad when she whined; now I know that’s what five year olds do. I don’t get mad anymore.”*

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### *What impact does the Family Support Network group have on parent empowerment?*

Survey results suggest that the sense of empowerment is evident after a parent has attended at least five meetings. Parents (more than half) feel they can positively impact

other parents in their community in addition to their FSN group. About half of the parents feel they can positively influence their community’s support of the FSN support groups. Approximately one-third believed they could positively impact their local advisory team and the statewide FSN organization.

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*“We are students and teachers for each other.”*

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### *What do participants say about parent leadership?*

Over time, many parents moved from being involved as a group participant to feeling ready to give back through service to other parents.

### *What do parents say about their community volunteer experiences?*

About one-third of the parents are volunteering in some capacity to help children and their families and 70 percent said they were volunteering because of their experience with FSN.

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*“I use the resources that are provided in group to help us stay together as a family.”*

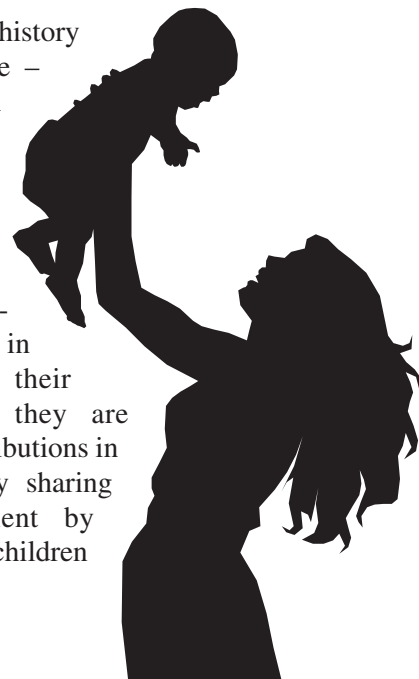
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## **DISCUSSION**

These findings are important for several reasons. The FSN support group model is based on mutual self-help and characterized by shared leadership. This model provides parents with an opportunity to participate in a group where they learn, practice, and are supported is a well-designed intervention for helping them to acquire new beliefs and skills.

Many people with a history of experiencing abuse – or who have been abusers themselves – feel powerless and hopeless. Parents completing this survey indicate that they do feel empowered to make changes in important areas of their lives. Furthermore, they are making positive contributions in their communities by sharing their time and talent by volunteering to help children and their families.

*(continued)*



## PRACTICE FINDINGS

- FSN mutual self-help support groups are doing a good job of reaching our target population and should continue to do so.
- Parents should be encouraged to attend a minimum of five support group meetings in order to begin feeling the benefits of empowerment and personal growth.
- Not only should facilitators have fair and reasonable expectations of parents' abilities, but facilitators should encourage parents to develop realistic expectations about their own parenting skills and practices.

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*“We want our children to be respectful of us, but we have to be respectful of them in return, and their needs are different from ours.”*

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- Sharing of information about community resources (i.e. during group time) is critical to helping families.
- Providing people with an opportunity to participate in a group where they learn, practice, and are supported is a well-designed intervention for helping people to acquire new beliefs and skills.

## LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Because this outcome evaluation study measured self-perceptions only, there is no verification of actual change. This study could be improved in several ways. First, the survey questions about outcomes could be strengthened by modifying the response choices to reflect a greater range of choices. Second, consideration should be given to developing behaviorally anchored items to measure parent behavior changes within the survey domains. Lastly increasing the pool of parents completing the survey and improving response rate of parents completing the survey would be another way to enhance the study.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Jay and Rose Phillips Foundation, who provided funding for this project.

Members of the Family Support Evaluation Task Force included Ed Siegel (Center for Evaluation Research), David Thompson (Minnesota Department of Human Services), Carma Bjornson (Child Care Resource and Referral, Inc.), Christa Treichel (Cooperative Ventures), Kate Dando, Heidi Hagel, and Connie Skillingstad (FSN staff), and Suzann Eisenberg Murray (former FSN staff). They commissioned this study, helped to formulate the design and the survey instrument, and assisted with the analysis and interpretation of data.

The FSN Parent Leadership Team participated in the pilot study and provided valuable feedback that improved the study. Other FSN staff helped facilitate the data collection process, FSN facilitators administered the tool during the month of April 2002, in their groups, and parents across the state volunteered some of their group time to complete the *Reflections* survey.

Thank you to Lisa Bugman, who provided consultation for the focus groups, and to Christa Treichel from Cooperative Ventures, who provided consultation for the *Reflections* survey.

For a copy of the full evaluation report, a copy of the executive summary, or to discuss this project in more detail, please contact Kate Dando, Associate Director at FSN, by phone 651-523-0099 Ext. 13 or 1-800-621-6322 Ext. 13, or email [kdando@familysupport.org](mailto:kdando@familysupport.org). For more information about how to refer parents to a local group, or how to start a new FSN support group in your community, please contact Heidi Hagel, Director of Family Support Services, by phone 651-523-0099 Ext. 11, or 1-800-621-6322 Ext. 11, or email [hhagel@familysupport.org](mailto:hhagel@familysupport.org).



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